

# Group Reading Diary

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*By Ting Yen-Ren*

## What is it?

Group Reading Diary? Yes, it is a diary a group of students keep on their readings. It is the practice of having EFL writers respond to each other's comments on the same piece of writing, and it is a teaching method that promotes second language development while the learner is engaged in genuine meaningful communication.

The class, in this case, a class of third year English majors, is divided up by itself into small "research teams," each with three to five students. After the team or group chooses a work of literature or some other material, one team member will write the first entry, giving his/her opinion on the work. For instance, with one team, the first entry reads:

In *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, by James Thurber, reality is interwoven with dreams.

Compared with Walter Mitty, his wife is more realistic. Unlike the female characters in much of literature, she is an independent lady and to some extent, controls Walter Mitty's life. She is no longer an oppressed figure. By creating an oppressed husband and a domineering wife, Thurber humorously and ironically criticizes the social system (under) which women should obediently do as men tell them.

The diary is passed on to a second member, who will then respond both to the work under study and to the first person's comment. Here, the second person on the team writes:

As Yan Gu (not a real name) has pointed out, Walter Mitty lives between reality and dreams. In reality, he is a most common person, timid, sensitive, while in his dreams, he becomes a brave and steady navy commander, a successful doctor, a crack shot, a courageous pilot, and an undefeated man looking death in the face.

As for James Thurber's criticism [with regard to] gender discrimination, I do not quite agree with Yan on this point. I do not think the writer puts his emphasis on the woman's control over her husband. He creates Mrs. Mitty, a rather "independent lady" as Yan has said, in order to show the sharp contrast between the heroic Mitty in his dreams and the real Mitty in true life. Probably there is some humor or irony in describing Mitty's obedience to his wife.

## Then, the Third Person Joins In:

In her entry, Yan Gu describes Mrs. Mitty as "an independent lady" who "is no longer an oppressed figure" and Wei Qiu also agrees to this point although she will hesitate to go further to accept Yan's point on gender discrimination.

It seems to me they both think a bit too highly of Mrs. Mitty. In my view, Thurber in fact shows his subtle sympathy for Walter Mitty and describes Mrs. Mitty somehow with a kind of irony.

On the surface, she may seem to be a domineering wife, but in fact, at least in Mitty's inner world, she is almost nothing. Being a simple-minded woman, [she] may think of herself as domineering but will never understand her ignorance.

The debate, in this case, on Mrs. Mitty, may go on and on. When the diary returns to the first person, he or she, if still enthusiastic, may launch into a counter-criticism. But the group may also decide to move onto another work whenever it feels like doing so.

While students are engaged in their written discussion, the teacher may step in at any time, either to offer additional evidence for an interesting point or to cast doubts on a questionable assertion. Taking sides in a debate may, in fact, generate more discussion, but trying to please everyone may distance oneself from the young debaters. If the students are truly "hooked on it," the teacher can correct learner errors without hampering the willingness for meaningful discussion.

From time to time, the teacher can have each student go over his/ her own entries and develop out of them a full-fledged essay. Again, the teacher can be confident that the student is writing on a topic of his/her own interest and, therefore, repeated revision is less likely to be a burden than it would be if the teacher assigned a topic.

The group reading diary approach to teaching composition, as sketched here, promotes concepts we as second language teachers always try to encourage—from the opportunity for language practice to that for meaningful group work, from tapping student initiative to providing assistance in literature study. What interests us most, however, is the fact that a group reading diary is conducive to second language "uptake" in a communicative context. By second language "uptake," we mean the growth of the learner's language through incorporation of target language features that are new to the learner. With the group reading diary, such growth takes place through the learner's engagement in genuine exchange of opinions with other learners. This can be further clarified in two aspects.

## **It is Communicative**

First, a group reading diary provides a communicative context. Keeping such a diary is an interactive, self-generated reading and writing experience, a process by which meaning is negotiated and developed over successive turns of reading and writing as students question, clarify, evaluate and elaborate an idea that arises out of their readings. Here, the focus is on real communication, not on form.

Often in a writing classroom, students write because they are asked to practice or demonstrate their command of some linguistic or rhetorical patterns. Language is at best practiced for its own sake. Even keeping a journal is not always free of artificiality since, here, the teacher is the only reader. Given the heavy workload of a teacher, his/her contribution to the interaction may not go very far beyond simple, offhand remarks.

The group reading diary provides an excellent chance of motivating students since they are given full freedom in choosing their own topics. As teachers, we know that students write well when they are fully engaged. The key to success in fostering a process of meaning cultivation and writing improvement lies in whether or not students have the opportunity to generate their own themes, relate to issues of their own concern and interest, and therefore discover the joy and satisfaction in writing.

The group reading diary helps create an atmosphere in which students feel that their self-expression is encouraged and respected; and that they are engaged in some sort of intellectual exchange with one another as grown-up individuals in an equal, trusting partnership. When they are fully occupied with developing, clarifying, and evaluating the ideas they themselves have generated, there would be less concern for formal correctness that is so often imposed on them and makes them passive, uninterested learners. In addition, the desire to express themselves may also drive them to consult and study the correct language forms, be it the spelling or meaning of a word or the use of a grammatical structure.

In keeping a group reading diary, it is more likely that students can be motivated to write with a clear sense of purpose and audience, and to struggle to bridge up what Prabhu (1987) regards as the "information gap," "reasoning gap," and "opinion gap," characteristic of real life communication.

The group diary also changes the teacher's role since it is essentially a student-centered learning activity. Too often we work as coroners pronouncing the cause of death of a student essay. The tradition of a relationship between learned professor and modest student weighs heavily even though we may try hard to live it down and to refrain from making judgmental comments such as "Good," "Very interesting," "You are making progress," or "Unsatisfactory."

Since the group reading diary is primarily a laboratory for uncoached and un-staged student discussion, the teacher's role is to a great extent reduced to one of stimulator, facilitator, and candid critic. When students are developing their ideas, we stand not in the middle, not above, but on the side, a position that helps remove the inhibition students often feel when they are to be assessed and graded by the all-powerful teacher.

## **It Promotes Language Uptake**

The second aspect of the group reading diary concerns what takes place in the communicative context it creates. Here, we are dealing with a fact advocates of communicative language teaching may overlook: Mere exposure to target language data, or, to use a phrase held dearly by

Krashen and associates, the "comprehensible input," does not necessarily lead to success in acquisition. Even keeping a private diary may not always be helpful because, like other forms of communicative activities, it "gives the student no assistance to go beyond what he or she already knows how to do" (Staton 1991) and gives no "interactional scaffolding" (Cazden 1983), that is, the supply, in the course of interaction, of linguistic resources fulfilling the needs of language interaction.

The group reading diary approach, on the other hand, may promote such second language uptake. When students are responding to a work, they make an effort to find evidence that supports their interpretation. As a result, they read more carefully and learn more from the text than they would when they read it, for instance, in order to answer reading comprehension questions.

The failure of the "comprehensible input" theory in second language literacy education is obvious. It has been long noted that for adult learners, better reading does not always lead to better writing. They may attain near-native levels of reading skills but still have trouble writing a simple paper. By contrast, school children, whether in first or second language settings, may not demonstrate much greater reading abilities than advanced adult learners. but their written work can be far superior in terms of the idiomatic use of the language. The gap between receptive and productive skills is much greater with adult second language users than with young adolescents.

Second language acquisition researchers point out that the utilization by adult learners of "compensatory strategies," that is, strategies used to compensate for a lack in the underlying interlanguage system, may enable them to by-pass the kind of speech requiring the use of this system and, therefore, may hinder the restructuring and improvement of this system (for example, Paribakht 1985; Schmidt 1983; Schmidt and Frota 1986; Swain 1985; Skehan 1992). Because with the use of these strategies, adult learners neither practice their interlanguage nor notice the gaps between the interlanguage and the target language; the "comprehensible input" does not turn into linguistic uptake. The same phenomenon shows up in second language literacy education. When adult learners bring various compensatory strategies into their reading processes, they may correctly guess the meaning from the context and achieve comprehension without using and improving their overall proficiency and thus without making significant progress in composing skills.

In a reading class or a reading exam, priority is given to comprehension. This is entirely legitimate since reading in real life is indeed almost exclusively meaning driven. However, insofar as such practice encourages the application of various compensatory strategies that serve the pressing need of meaning extraction, it may also, at the same time, attenuate the pressure for the use and thus the improvement of the learners' emerging second language system, or remove this pressure from the process of learning to read in a second language.

Keeping a reading diary is a way of coping with this problem. Unlike free writing or keeping a personal diary, writing an entry for a reading diary which will be subsequently shared among those who have done the same reading (but may hold different opinions about it) may encourage closer reading and encourage simultaneous attention to content and form in the course of reading. When learners know they are expected to do some written work in response to *The*

*Secret Life of Walter Mitty* and to hold discussion on it with their peers, they may feel the need to attend to and adopt from the story expressions that can help convey their own thoughts about the story. They may modify the way they read because they know that focusing on surface level comprehension will not be enough to enable them to generate and convey ideas in clear language. Even when they write, they may go back to the text for closer re-reading. In short, having to prepare for writing and defending their own opinions predisposes learners to pay attention to the way meaning is conveyed in works of mature writers.

When students quote the description of Walter Mitty, they are benefiting from the linguistic sources or "scaffolding" that James Thurber supplies. Here, the language structures and chunks in the text are not singled out for practice in their own right but are employed meaningfully; that is, they are employed to express, support, and expand the learner's own thoughts in response to the writer's- often elaborated with the same structures and chunks.

While using the group reading diary method, we may encourage close reading and language uptake by advising students to take several steps in writing a diary entry:

1. Read the text for meaning (first reading).
2. Read in order to prepare for writing the entry, jotting down all the chunks (words, expressions and sentences) that might be used in the entry (second reading).
3. Draft the entry, using these chunks in appropriate places.
4. Read the original text again to check how the chunks borrowed into the draft are used in the text (third reading).
5. Revise and proofread the entry.

## Conclusion

Traditional, grammar-centered language teaching attempts to develop the learner's second language in isolation from the context of communication, whereas a communicative approach may emphasize the simulation of real life interaction to the neglect of developing the underlying second language system. Promoting second language uptake in a communicative context, as discussed here, is more than finding a middle ground between the two. Using group reading diaries in the composition class seems to require that we as teachers reflect on our readiness to allow our students to take more initiative for their own learning and to use their creativity, knowledge and experience as the foundation for acquiring second language literacy.

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